1: Hart & Pilling E-5 (1928-1954) 1960
OI20 Tiwi OI20

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Tiwi Marriage

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Cultural Isolation

PEOPLE WHO LIVE in the congested cities and towns of the modern world have difficulty in realizing how different life can be at the hunting and gathering level of human existence. The basic fact about the life of hunters and gatherers is the thinly spread-out manner in which they live and the isolation of families and households from each other. In the case of the Tiwi, these conditions of isolation and dispersal were accentuated by their island habitat. Melville and Bathurst Islands lie off the northern coast of Australia some fifty to eighty miles from Darwin, which is the administrative capital of the empty north. They are separated from the mainland by about twenty-five miles of open sea at the narrowest part. This distance is slightly greater than the distance that separates England from France at the Straits of Dover, and just as the dim outline of coastal France can be seen from England on clear days, so the dim outline of the Australian mainland can be seen from the southern edges of the islands. However, Tiwi tradition is firm and certain that before the white man's arrival there was no contact between the islands and the mainland. To them, the dimly seen coastline of Australia was *Tibambinumi*, the home of the dead, to which all Tiwi souls went after death. It follows from this they they regarded the inhabited world as composed of their own two islands, and on those islands they lived a self-contained and exclusive existence. Occasionally outsiders appeared, either castaways from surrounding areas, including presumably the Australian mainland, and in recent centuries, fishing boats and pirates from Indonesia, loosely called "Malays" in the literature. To such visitors from outside, the Tiwi were consistently and implacably hostile. Their own traditions and what little written history there is of "Malay" penetration into the Arafura Sea both tell the same story. Outsiders who landed on the islands were massacred or vigorously resisted. Whether they were classified as *Malai-ui* ("Malays") or *Wona-rui*

1: Hart & Pilling E-5 (1928-1954) 1960
OI20 Tiwi OI20

186 609 (Australian aborigines from the mainland) they were not Tiwi and hence not real people, or at least not human enough to share the islands with the chosen people who owned them.

Thus, the word "Tiwi" did not mean "people" in the sense of all human [101] beings, but rather "we, the only people," or the chosen people who live on and own the islands, as distinct from any other alleged human beings who might show up from time to time on the beaches. This exclusion of outsiders from real "us-ness" and hence from real "human-ness" was continued when the Europeans began to arrive in the early nineteenth century, and certainly as late as 1930 the Tiwi continued to call and think of themselves as Tiwi, *the* people, and to use other words for all non-Tiwi, whether they were mainland aborigines, Malay fishermen, Japanese pearl-divers, French priests, or British officials, who penetrated into their exclusive little cosmos.

Their firm tradition that the twenty-five miles of ocean were adequate [173] to isolate them from the mainland is confirmed by certain objective distribu- 171 tional evidence. Several characteristic features of mainland native technology were absent on Melville and Bathurst Islands, notably the spear thrower and the curved (or return) boomerang. To anthropologists, the idea of an Australian tribe lacking spear throwers and curved boomerangs is almost a contradiction in terms, and the only feasible explanation is isolation and hence failure of these mainland traits to diffuse to the islands.[1]

That no culture stands absolutely still in its technology no matter how [411] isolated it may be is suggested by the fact that the Tiwi, while lacking the spear thrower and curved boomerang of the mainland, elaborated their [531] wooden spears to a complexity of design and a degree of decoration unknown on the mainland, and also developed a much greater assortment of straight throwing sticks, made of hardwood, than any mainland tribe. Moreover, their carved and elaborately painted grave posts are unique among Aus- [764] tralian tribes, and point up both the Tiwi isolation from the mainland and the [511] favorable food situation which permitted the leisure time necessary to manufacture the elaborate posts as well as the elaborate ceremonial spears. In the nontechnological aspects of their culture we find in many respects the same absence of mainland traits and the same elaboration of traits that were distinctively or even uniquely Tiwi. Male initiation ceremonies on the mainland focus upon circumcision or subincision or both; neither custom was practiced by the Tiwi, who instead included in their initiation ritual the forcible plucking out of the pubic hair of the novice. The degree of plural marriages achieved under their marriage rules was far greater than anything reported for the mainland; the absolute prohibition of any female, regardless of age, being without a husband was unknown elsewhere in Australia; certain features of the kinship system fail to conform to any of the mainland norms, and so on. Wherever we look in their culture we get the strong impression of an Aus-

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[177 524] [1] A toy spear thrower, played with by children, was in use, but this may be the result of post-white contact. Its native name—*pani*—seems most un-Tiwi, and a likely guess is that it was introduced by Cooper's mainlanders, being accepted as a toy for children but scorned as childish by the adult men.

1: Hart & Pilling E-5 (1928-1954) 1960
OI20 Tiwi OI20

southern coast of Bathurst Island. In 1886, the Australian government tried to erect channel markers on the southern shore of Melville Island, whereupon the Tiwi immediately "salvaged" both cloth and iron from them. During June and July of the same year the ship *Jane Anderson* was stranded on the shoals of first Melville and then Bathurst Island. Also in 1886, two Malay proas were wrecked on the north coast of Melville Island. That year was a great one for looting.

Occasionally visitors came ashore on the islands. The Stokes' survey party landed in the late 1830's, but saw no natives. A government party crossed Melville Island in 1887; the Tiwi speared its leader. In 1893, a government tourist party went to look over the ruins of old Fort Dundas; they kept their eyes open and no one was injured. In 1897, Joe Cooper, a buffalo shooter, tried to make a living from the Melville Island buffalo; he was speared and retreated to Darwin.

Tiwi treatment of outsiders prior to 1900 had been to rob them, spear them, kill them. This is not, however, the picture painted by modern Tiwi when talking of their past. They claim that their ancestors greeted each new group of strangers with the cry: *"Pongki! Pongki!"* (meaning, "Peace! Peace!"). But then it should be noted that before 1900 many a Tiwi peacemaker carried a spear between his toes. Yet under these circumstances the Tiwi world view did alter. First there were those changes which came from an attempt to understand the new objects which were suddenly thrust into the Tiwi world: the trade knives and axes given by Dutch navigators, the matchlock guns used by the Malays and probably the Portuguese, the rice given to Tiwi by the surveyors under P. P. King, the Indonesian water buffalo introduced by the British at their short-lived settlement, the coconut palms the English left behind them, the cups and plates from shipwrecks in the 1880's, and the flour tossed overboard to lighten foundering vessels. The Tiwi cherished iron knives and axes, readily recognizing their greater efficiency. The Tiwi begged for them; they stole them; and, when a spar washed ashore bound round with iron bands, the natives burned away the wood and took the iron away to grind into axes. The matchlock gun, and even the later flintlock, could be coped with; when one saw the flash, one ducked flat, just in case the weapon worked, and then rushed in to impale the stranger with a spear. Rice was useless; it looked like the larvae of the termite, which was not good for anything anyway. Buffalo were to be killed; they kept wallowing in the best waterholes. Coconut palms were a great disappointment; they were bigger than the local cabbage palm, but when cut down, did not have the same succulent interior. Plates were too much bother to carry around, but cups were worth saving for a while. Flour could be used for white paint, but it was not as good as the best white pigment near at hand.

Other modifications took place in Tiwi life before 1900 as a result of action by outsiders. Probably the greatest of these alterations came as a result of slave raiding, or "black birding" as it is called in the South Seas. The Tiwi always kept their young women hidden from strangers, even if they were just visitors from other bands. The old men rarely left camp. Therefore, it was the

5: Basedow D-5 (1911)1913 OI20 Tiwi OI20

takes the part of a hunter endeavouring to drive his spear into the enraged kangaroo on the opposite side of the ring.

Corrobboree of the ship of war.—The next item in the ceremony appeals to us Europeans in a twofold sense. Firstly, the mimicry on the part of the aboriginal in an introduced scene is excellent: its effect being still more enhanced in that his artistic genius has expanded the original impressions by adequate interludes of his own invention and taste. Secondly, the observer's sentiment and appreciation are kindled afresh when he sees this savage folk, who are oft not credited with the possession of anything but vice and immorality, present to a subsequent and younger generation, scenes in living picture, which happened long ago in the days of the naval settlement of Fort Dundas. To us the records are available in the libraries throughout the world; to the aboriginal the events can only be handed down by tradition and such ceremonies as that which is now to be described.

The chorus or semicircular group of men have again started their rhythmical accompaniment by clapping upon the lateral aspect of their thighs with the arched palm of one hand. A performer rushes into the centre of the half-ring and, after going through a few preliminaries, stands with one of his legs placed a short distance in front of the other and slightly flexed at the knee. Throwing his head back and looking upwards, he starts a vigorous hauling action by alternately throwing one arm out in the direction he is looking, closing the fist and making an imaginary pull right down to his loins, while at the same time the opposite arm is thrown out and returned in a similar way. Accurate time is kept by the time-beaters. This act is in imitation of the hauling-in of a sail on a European man-of-war, such as the natives saw at Fort Dundas nearly a century ago. The performer now turns and runs to the opposite corner of the half-ring; the onlookers marking the time by clapping to it in a quickened beat produced with both hands upon their buttocks. The same act is repeated there several times. Next, the same hauling motion is continued, but reversed from below towards the body, in imitation of the hauling-up of an anchor. Several short and harsh interjections suggest the orders of the commanding officers and the whole ceremony, in fact, is reproduced with a suspicion of caricature upon the strictness of naval discipline. During this part of the performance, several cries of "poop" and "iah" are again sounded. The actor now moves about in the semicircle with the familiar stamping of feet and cutting out the most grotesque antics. He first extends his arms straight out on either side, throws his head back and moves his thorax laterally in a pendulous manner from the hips. Then he turns his arms through a right-angle frontwards, so that they project slantingly upwards, whence he again changes them to the former position. Then again he extends his arms downward and bends them so that the elbows project behind and his fists rest against his flanks, from which position they are presently changed to a straight pendulous one. After remaining in that position a short while, he suddenly throws them furiously upwards in front of him; the stamping, which has been

11:Goodale E-8 (1954,1962) 1963 CE20 Tiwi CE20

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YAMS TO BE USED in *Kulama* ceremony are retrieved from a fresh-water pool in which they had been soaked overnight.

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[177]

For instance,
The composer of the following song had just returned from Brisbane, where he and a group of eight other aborigines had performed dances in honor of Queen Elizabeth's 1954 visit to Australia:

[539]

"The Queen was talking in England,
'I would like to see a blackfellow dance.'
When I was in Brisbane, the Queen said,
'I would like to meet a black boy!'
And I went up.
King Philip, he had a good look at me.
He was watching a lot as I danced.
I was singing into a loud-speaker."

[173]

Some songs are historic in nature, retelling an event that must be kept alive according to the traditions of the tribe. One such composition recalls the Japanese attack on Darwin during World War II:

[539]

"An enemy plane flies low over Melville Island.
The men on the ground, at the word 'Standby,'
Shoot it down with a cannon."

The children of the singer are often song subjects. This first example describes how the children behaved in one of their father's dreams.

[539]

"My children have gone to the other side
of the island.
But they must come back as they are hard up
for tobacco.
My children have now come back.
I know this for they have taken the tobacco
which I have held in my hand."

or

"My children will wear clothes and shoes.
They will go to school and learn to write."

All the songs have the same chanting tune, which is associated with the *Kulama* ceremony, and the composer must fit his words to the set meter of the chant. In many cases this requires using archaic words that are no longer a

[P. 14, (1)]